

Bay of Pigs conference ends with visit to infamous beach

By Anita Snow

Associated Press writer

BAY OF PIGS, Cuba — Alfredo Durán stared out at the deep blue water off the voluptuous Cuban coastline Saturday and recalled the painful losses his exile invasion force suffered on this Cold War battlefield.

"That's where the supply boats were, the ones that the Cubans sank," Durán said, pointing out at the sea where a team of Cuban exiles armed and trained by the CIA suffered a disastrous defeat 40 years ago at an invasion known as the Bay of Pigs.

At the close of a conference studying the April 1961 invasion, Durán joined ex-CIA operatives, former assistants to President Kennedy, and the retired Cuban military commanders who fought against them in a visit to the idyllic beach where it all happened.

"I would do it again, considering the times," said Durán, a compact man with white hair and glasses. "The times have changed, and one has to change with the times."

Cuba scholar Wayne Smith, an American diplomat who left Havana when relations between the two countries were severed months before the invasion, had a different point of view.

"It's time to begin a process of healing and reconciliation. Our government doesn't seem to realize that, but the people here do," Smith said, referring to the 150 conference participants.

The trip to Playa Girón, as the beach on the island's south-central coast is known, came on the last day of a three-day conference that

brought together protagonists of the battle between the exiles and the Cuban militia.

Cuban President Fidel Castro took part, but it was not clear whether he would visit the beach. Most participants spent Thursday and Friday behind closed doors, poring over newly declassified documents on the event.

Castro joined them in front of a map on Friday as they exchanged recollections about the three-day invasion. Thomas Blanton of the National Security Archive told reporters late Friday.

The archive, based at George Washington University, helped organize the event with the University of Havana.

Dedicated to declassifying secret U.S. documents, the archive provided participants with a wealth of new information about the invasion, which has shaped U.S.-Cuba relations for the four decades since.

Trained by the CIA in Guatemala, the 2506 Brigade comprised about 1,500 exiles determined to overthrow Castro's government, which had seized power 28 months before.

The three-day invasion failed. Without U.S. air support and adequate ammunition, more than 1,000 invaders were captured. Another 100 invaders and 151 defenders died.

The Cuban government also released a number of previously secret papers.

In one Cuban document released to reporters Friday evening, Vice President José Ramón Fernández, who led the defending forces on the beach as a young military captain,

listed what he considered his numerous errors.

Writing shortly after the battle, Fernández said leaders did not sufficiently control their troops, subordinates acted on their own and tank operators were improperly trained.

There were some light moments in the conference. At one point, an amused Castro read aloud from a U.S. document assessing his personality after his U.S. visit as Cuba's new prime minister in early 1959, participants said.

The group also studied the first known CIA document calling for Castro's assassination.